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# IRISH BIBLICAL STUDIES

## **Editor:**

REV PROFESSOR J. C. MCCULLOUGH  
Union Theological College  
26 College Green, Belfast BT7 1LN  
☎: [44] 028 90 20 50 81  
Email: jc.mccullough@union.ac.uk

## **Associate Editor:**

REV. PROFESSOR ERNEST BEST  
13 Newmill Gardens  
St. Andrews KT16 8RY

## **Assistant Editor:**

MRS SANDRA MCKINNEY  
Union Theological College  
26 College Green, Belfast BT7 1LN

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# IRISH BIBLICAL STUDIES

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## **The Consequences of the Increase in and the Changed Role of Letter-Writing for the Early Church**

*Craig A. Smith*

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This paper begins by showing how the Greco-Roman world moved gradually from an overtly oral culture in the sixth century BCE to a hybrid oral-written one, though the oral element was still predominate by the time of the first century CE. The knock on effect was the increase in the use of letter-writing in the culture and the concomitant increase in the different types of letters used. In this paper, I also present and explain the specific events and the changes in cultural attitudes which were the impetus to the progressively increasing role letter-writing took in the Greco-Roman period. The final section of this paper is dedicated to show how these changes were significant for the early church to fulfil its mission more efficiently.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first purpose of this paper is to show that the use of letter-writing progressively increased in the Greco-Roman world through to the first century CE and that the role of letter-writing changed. The second purpose of this paper is to show the consequences which the changed role and increased use of letter-writing had on the early church. To achieve the first purpose I will identify specific events which directly effected an increase in the use of letter-writing and I will show the factors which changed in the culture so that the role of writing increased in importance and use. My logic with respect to the latter is as follows. If I can show that the role of writing has increased and that there has been a movement from an oral culture to an oral-written culture then it logically follows that letter-writing will increase too because it is one of many forms of writing which existed in the ancient Greco-Roman world (others examples include speeches, artistic works, legislation, deeds etc.). In an oral culture there are certain factors and attitudes

which prohibit a culture from embracing writing and using letter-writing. But as these factors and attitudes are changed then writing and letter-writing can be embraced into the culture which, as I will show, happened in the Greco-Roman world. Initially the Greco-Roman world was predominately an oral culture with certain factors prohibiting them from moving to a written culture. But through the course of time, and because of certain events and changes in attitude, the culture began to embrace increasingly the use of writing and letter-writing. In this paper, I will begin by showing the factors which prohibited the movement towards a written culture and inhibited the use of letter-writing, followed by the factors which caused a movement towards a written culture and an increase in the use and role of letter-writing.

### *Factors Prohibiting Movement to a Written Culture and Use of Letter-Writing*

#### **Literacy**

Thomas has shown, to define literacy is a complex matter and prone to personal subjectivity. Equally difficult is the task of ascertaining literacy rates because of the paucity of information. She postulates three definitions of literacy, ranging from the most fundamental level (e.g. ostracism<sup>1</sup> which required one simply to be able to write one's signature) to the 'functional' or 'craft literacy'<sup>2</sup> (i.e. the person has the basic understanding of reading and writing simple personal or business messages<sup>3</sup> and comprehension of government steles) and finally to skillful readers and writers (e.g. the rich, elite, highly educated and secretaries who were capable of reading highly stylized literary works). With these three disparate definitions, it is

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, R. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*, p.18.

<sup>2</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.7.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.11 reaches a similar conclusion.



easy to understand how literacy rates could be skewed<sup>4</sup>. Traditionally literacy rates have been determined by the first definition resulting in overestimated literacy rates<sup>5</sup>.

A similar problem determining literacy rates occurs because of scholars' bias towards 'those who could write, for only they leave clear evidence of their skills'<sup>6</sup>. Traditionally, however, literacy is considered to mean someone can read and write. Therefore if someone can read but not write he is illiterate. But in Ancient Greece, it was partially a cultural phenomenon that more people could read than write. An individual might be expected to read a manuscript but if something was needed to be written, the cultural norm was to hire a scribe. Thus literacy rates can be underestimated if an allowance for this cultural difference is not factored into the equation.

Other issues impinge on the determination of literacy. The respective populations of the different sectors and their needs within the society require consideration since, for example, a farmer would have little need to read or write anything technical to fulfill his occupation but an urban bureaucrat would. Similarly literacy rates will vary between urban and rural settings. Orality is another concomitant issue which affected the literacy rate, but due to its significance it will be addressed later in a separate section.

Harris carefully considers these issues when he concludes that the ancient world never achieved 'mass literacy' but a 'rather low level

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, p.3-4.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.9. From a later period, Hermeros, Petronius' *Satyricon* (Sat. 58.7) confirms this when he admits that he knows only 'lapidary writing' (*lapidariae litterae*), that is capitals of inscriptions. Youtie, H.C. *Βραδέως γραφῶν: between literacy and illiteracy*, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 12 (1971) pp.239-61. Youtie cites the example of a so-called scribe who was illiterate except for the poor ability to write his own name.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.10.

of craftsman's literacy<sup>7</sup>. He postulates a literacy figure of 10% of the population<sup>8</sup>, with the women, the lower social strata and slaves having the lowest levels. Thus literacy<sup>9</sup> was not widespread despite the introduction of the alphabet in the eighth century which simplified the Greek language into a comprehensible written language for the masses<sup>10</sup>. Though Harris has had to work with scanty information<sup>11</sup> his conclusions nevertheless bear out that writing was not prevalent in the ancient Greco-Roman world and the number who could actually write and read letters was minimal and thus the number of letters produced was few.

## Education

The second factor prohibiting movement to a written culture was the unavailability of education for the masses. The education infrastructure for children to learn to read and write took place in the home<sup>12</sup>. According to Thomas<sup>13</sup> the formal education for these

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<sup>7</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.61.

<sup>8</sup>*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.869; Harris, W.V. *Ancient Literacy* p.13. For other works on this issue see Beard, M. *Literacy in the Roman World*, 1991; Bowman, A.K. & Woolf, G. (eds.) *Literacy and Power*, 1994.

<sup>9</sup>See Thomas R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 1992 pp.8ff. who outlines some of the pitfalls in defining 'literacy'.

<sup>10</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.46.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.11.

<sup>12</sup>The following quotation from Xenophon, *Memorabilia of Socrates*, 2.2.6 probably reflects the situation in the very early Greek world in which education took place under the parents and then later under a tutor: 'Nor does it satisfy the parents merely to feed their offspring, but as soon as the children appear capable of learning anything, they teach them whatever they know that may be of use for their conduct in life; and whatever they consider another more capable of communicating than themselves, they send their sons to him at their own expense, and take care to adopt every course that their children may be as much improved as possible'. See also Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15-17, 48.



special skills was on an 'ad hoc' and individual basis<sup>14</sup> through tutors, who were possibly the forerunners of the later paidagogos (see Xen. Mem 2.2.6). Since education<sup>15</sup> was funded by individuals, learning to read and write was exclusive to the aristocracy and rich. It is tempting to take the opposite position based on the comments of Diodorus about the lawgiver Charondas of Catana's (circa end of 6<sup>th</sup> century):

[Charondas sic.] laid down that all the sons of the citizens should learn letters, with the city providing the pay of the teachers; for he assumed that people without means, who could not pay fees on their own, would otherwise be cut off from the finest pursuits. For this lawgiver rated writing above other forms of knowledge and with very good reason... (Diodorus xxii. 12-13)

But Harris is correct when he writes 'but the force of this idea was never widespread...even in Greek cities, where so much was politically disputed, elementary education very seldom seems to

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<sup>13</sup>*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.506

<sup>14</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.13. 'In most places [sic. Greek and Roman World] most of the time, there was no incentive for those who controlled the allocation of resources to aim for mass literacy. Hence the institutional *lacunae* which would have impeded any movement towards mass literacy-above all, the shortage of subsidized schools, were confronted to no more than a slight extent'.

<sup>15</sup>Much of the education for adults took place in informal aristocratic settings, like the symposium. Poets were to a great degree considered the educators in the Archaic period (and their effect lingered into the classical period). See Aristophanes. "The Frogs." Trans. Rogers, Benjamin B. *Aristophanes*. The Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1924. 1055 'For boys a teacher at school is found, but we, the poets, are teachers of men'. Again the emphasis was upon listening not writing nor reading.



have been an important issue<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore it should be noted that Charondas restricts his sphere of education to the sons of citizens which automatically prohibits girls and non-citizens of either sex to receive an education. Even if there had been a mass education system, there was no powerful motivating force, such as personal economic benefit, for parents to send their children to schools to read and write or parents teach their own children since the majority of people were in rural settings. The urgencies of agriculture necessitated using the children for the seasonal needs<sup>17</sup> instead which is the same problem in developing countries today.

Thus since education was limited to such a slim proportion of the populace then it follows logically that writing in general and letter-writing specifically was not widespread.

### **Availability of Writing Materials**

The third factor prohibiting movement to a written culture and the limitation of letter-writing was the unavailability of economical writing materials. Even though the Egyptians had invented papyrus<sup>18</sup> as a writing material around 3000 BCE<sup>19</sup> it was not widely traded nor in the hands of the populace because of expense<sup>20</sup>. Herodotus, in his historical account of the Peloponisian Wars, says that parchments were used because there was a scarcity of

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<sup>16</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.21

<sup>17</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.19-20

<sup>18</sup>See Kenyon, Fredric G. *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri* pp.14-33 for a discussion about the production and use of papyrus; and also Pestman, P.W. *The New Papyrological Primer* pp. 1ff.. Herodotus furnishes us with the first reference to Greeks using papyrus H(erodotus v.58) and it suggests it had been in use for some time. Pliny records for us much concerning the use and production of papyrus (Natural History xii. 11-13)

<sup>19</sup>White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.213.

<sup>20</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15,46.

papyrus<sup>21</sup>. Other more common economical writing materials (e.g. ostraca, wood, clay tablets) were sought. But these materials were impractical since they had inadequate writing surfaces for most correspondences or they were too heavy and cumbersome to transport or the surfaces did not provide a smooth surface from which to read. A minor consideration is that there was a lack of eyeglasses<sup>22</sup> so that even if writing materials did exist they were not helpful to some.

## Role of Personal Messengers

The fourth factor mitigating against an increased use of letter-writing was the extensive use of personal messengers. The primary medium of communication between separated parties was not written but oral using personal messengers to transmit messages. This phenomenon changed very slowly through the subsequent centuries. Messengers were usually personal slaves<sup>23</sup> or trusted soldiers<sup>24</sup> though professional messenger services existed. They were used for personal and business matters but also for political and military correspondences<sup>25</sup>. There were several reasons why

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<sup>21</sup>Cary, H. *Herodotus* v.58.

<sup>22</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15. See Quintillian *Institutes* X.3.31 who refers to *visus infirmior* and thus the need to use parchment instead of wax tablets because they are easier to read.

<sup>23</sup>According to Chevallier, in Ptolemaic Egypt, these messengers were considered to be civil servants. see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines*, p.208. See also White, J.L. who writes 'Wealthy Roman families used slaves as couriers, and wealthy Egyptian Greeks also used special letter carriers, either servants or employees'; *The Greek Documentary Letter*, p.103.

<sup>24</sup>White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.215.

<sup>25</sup>The situation surrounding the letter in 2 Sam 11:14 is probably indicative about the aristocracy's use of and preference for personal messengers. Initially King David sends a letter (βιβλίον, 2 Sam 11:14) concerning a personal issue via Uriah to Joab the commanding officer. Joab sends a messenger with a message, giving a full verbal account of the battle



personal messengers were preferred over letters. Convenience was one reason. To communicate an oral message to a personal messenger was quicker than the time required to compose a letter<sup>26</sup>. Also, messengers could return more quickly when transmitting oral messages than having to wait for a letter to be written. Security was another reason for favouring personal messengers<sup>27</sup>. By delivering an oral message, the risk of having the message intercepted<sup>28</sup> by a political or personal enemy<sup>29</sup> and subsequently having it used

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(πάντας τοὺς λόγους τοῦ πολέμου), not a letter, which he is to share with King David (2 Sam 11:18). King David in return sends an oral message, not a letter, back to Joab via the same messenger (2 Sam 11:25). David used a letter in the first instance in order to keep the contents hidden from the messenger, Uriah, since it contained orders for his death. But interestingly, Joab and King David used oral communication for the other correspondences. A possible reason for doing so is security since these messages dealt with military operations including David's order 'to attack the city and destroy it' (2 Sam 11:25).

<sup>26</sup>see Kim, Chan-Hie "The Papyrus Invitation" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94:3 September (1975) pp.391-402. In the case of the written invitations in Egyptian papyri, Kim found this to be true. He concludes that 'the rarity of written invitations compared with other kinds of papyrus documents is a good proof that invitations were not usually written but carried orally by servants or messengers' (p.397)

<sup>27</sup>Cicero sought the use of personal messengers due to the unreliability of the postal service, which after his death was improved by Augustus, who created the '*cursus publicus*'. See Badian, E. "Postal Service." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Eds. N. G. L. Mammoud and H. H. Scullard. 2nd ed. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970. 869.

<sup>28</sup>This fear is reflected in *Cicero Ad Att.* IV.15.4. Cicero (106-43 BC) writes 'my letters to you being of the kind they generally are, I do not like giving them to anybody unless I can be sure that he will deliver them to you'.

<sup>29</sup>In some cases a letter was sent along with the messenger so that the addressee would know the authority and authenticity of the letter. Sennacherib sent a letter with his messengers to Hezekiah to authenticate his claim that he would destroy Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:9-14).

against the author was reduced<sup>30</sup>. It is interesting to note that even when the role of letter-writing increased during the later Ptolemaic and Roman periods, concern for security caused many to continue to use messengers to transmit important messages orally. It is for this reason, Doty concludes that the content of many later Greco-Roman letters are vague or superficial relying on a mutually trusted messenger (i.e. trusted by the addresser and addressee) to convey the more delicate matters<sup>31</sup>.

## Postal Service

There was neither a private nor public postal service by which to transport letters in the ancient Greco-Roman world, thus severely hampering the increase of letter-writing. The first postal service was likely founded further east by the Assyrians and adopted later by the Persians<sup>32</sup> in the sixth century BCE. It was praised for its speed and extensiveness by Herodotus<sup>33</sup> and Xenophon<sup>34</sup> and

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<sup>30</sup>Because of this very issue Julius Caesar wrote in cipher (see Suetonius, *The Lives of Caesar*, 76).

<sup>31</sup>See Doty, William *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, p.2. Quite often letter-writers would end their letter telling the recipient to ask the messenger, a mutually trusted individual, to explain more fully the contents of the letter. For example, in the letter of Synesius to Theotimus (#53) he writes 'but the excellent Acacius (the carrier of this letter) knows my whole mind. He will tell you even more than I have directed him to tell you, for loves me greatly' (Doty, *Letters*, 2). Likewise in the example of the Letter of Simale to Zenon (PCol III 6), written early March 257 BC, he concludes his letter 'The rest learn from the one who carries the letter to you. For he is no stranger to us' White, *Light*, 34).

<sup>32</sup>White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.214. White postulates the Persians' recent precursors, the Assyrians may have begun the first one but it is only the Persian service that has conclusive support of its existence.

<sup>33</sup>Herodotus commenting on the speed and method of the Persian system says 'There is nothing mortal that reaches its destination more rapidly than these couriers: it has been thus planned by the Persians. They say that as many days as are occupied in the whole journey, so many horses and men are posted at regular intervals, a horse and a man being stationed at each



became the model<sup>35</sup> for the subsequent postal systems created by Alexander the Great, his successors (the Ptolemies in Egypt, Seleucids in central Asia) and Augustus Caesar<sup>36</sup>. This system was solely for government affairs<sup>37</sup>. The average person was dependent on the very unpredictable custom of finding a traveller going to the same place as the addressee<sup>38</sup>. Messages would often be lost or undelivered<sup>39</sup>. This risk was reduced for the aristocracy and rich because they used personal slaves or soldiers. The main problem of the earliest postal service was that it was slow due to the lack of transportation infrastructure (e.g. roads, shipping routes) and safe travel.

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day's journey: neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor night, prevents them from performing their appointed stage as quick as possible. The first courier delivers his orders to the second, the second to the third, and so it passes throughout, being delivered from one to the other, just like the torch-bearing among the Greeks, which they perform in honour of Vulcan'. *Herodotus* 8.98

<sup>34</sup>Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.17-18

<sup>35</sup>Zilliaccus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post*, p.19.

<sup>36</sup>Based on Suetonius' records (Suetonius, *The Deified Julius*, 57) Chevallier notes that 'Rien d'officiel n'existait à l'époque de César (i.e. Julius): on voit le dictateur louer des voitures pour de longs déplacements, sans doute à des collègues qui devaient s'entendre de ville à ville'. see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaine* p.208. Most likely Suetonius is referring to the outer limits of the empire to which he travelled. It was in this context in which Augustus Caesar created the *cursus publicus*. Suetonius describes its mechanics and purpose in *Lives of Caesar: Augustus*, 49.

<sup>37</sup>Zilliaccus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post*, p.21.

<sup>38</sup>For examples, see Winter, J.G. *Life and Letter in Papyri*, p.40, 82 and White, J.L. *Light*, p.146, 172,182,215.

<sup>39</sup>For examples, see Winter, J.G. *Life and Letter in Papyri*, p.40, 82 and White, J.L. *Light*, p.146, 172,182,215.

## Sixth Century Philosophy

In the sixth century BCE philosophy was blooming<sup>40</sup> though letter-writing and written communication played minor roles for these Philosophers. One reason was that the focus of philosophers during this time was not pedagogical<sup>41</sup>. These early philosophers were independent thinkers attempting 'to give a rational account of the origin and existing state of the world and the powers operative within it'<sup>42</sup>. Their concern was not to teach the public nor to create a school *per se*, in which the philosopher would gather many students around himself to teach them philosophy, oratory and writing as the later Sophists did. Because the nature of their work was esoteric, it actually alienated them from the majority of the populace. Their ideas were not practical ones and therefore there was little need nor practice of writing down their ideas outside the immediate circle of the initiated. Indeed they did not engage in solicitation for adherents in order to support themselves<sup>43</sup>. In short sixth century BC philosophy was not an impetus for expanding the use of writing or developing writing skills and certainly had no positive effect on the increase of letter-writing.

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<sup>40</sup>Historians generally call the period prior to the fifth century BC the Pre-Socratic phase.

<sup>41</sup>"Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1002.

<sup>42</sup>"Philosophy" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.743.

<sup>43</sup>Even though they were not concerned to find followers, inevitably some did (e.g. Pythagoras). Their number is small in comparison to the later Sophists.



## Orality

Thomas defines orality as 'the extensive reliance on oral communication rather than the written word'<sup>44</sup>. The *modus operandi* in the ancient world was certainly an oral one. This can be clearly demonstrated from the oral preference in composition, communication and the transmission of information, tradition and literature<sup>45</sup>.

Poetry best exemplifies the oral nature of composing literature. Poems were created spontaneously in oral form. The symposium was one outlet where these spontaneous poets would compose as they performed<sup>46</sup>. Only subsequent to their performance were some of these oral compositions written down. Since composition was primarily oral and because so few were published, there was a paucity of books in the archaic period. People did not sit alone to read a book leisurely rather they gathered in a group to listen to a story orally<sup>47</sup>. Books did become steadily more common from the

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<sup>44</sup>Thomas, R. 'Orality' Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 1 ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 1072. Thomas also recognizes that orality is defined as the opposite of literacy.

<sup>45</sup>Thomas, R. 'Orality' Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 1 ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 1072.

<sup>46</sup>For further understanding about how poets would compose in performance see Lord, A. *The Singer of Tales*, 1960. Other works about the role and nature of poetry see Gentili, B. *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece*, 1988 and Herington, C.J. *Poetry into Drama*, 1985. These ancient poets were much like the rap singers found on the street corners of large American cities today performing extemporaneously for profit.

<sup>47</sup>A contemporary analogy in our modern culture is the choice people make to see a story through a movie instead of reading it.

fifth century BCE onwards<sup>48</sup> but there was still this stigma to overcome. This can be seen in Aristophanes' quotation from the *The Frogs* 'everyone having a book nowadays'<sup>49</sup> meaning that everyone had a copy of the play on their laps while they watched the play. This quotation demonstrates a couple of things 1) that change in the performing arts culture from a purely oral one to a combination oral-written one 2) that this change was not universally acceptable particularly to the members of the performing arts academy suggesting there was an awkwardness for people to adopt the written culture into their primarily oral one.

The norm for communication was oral not written. Therefore, as was stated above, personal messengers giving oral messages were used instead of written messages. Similarly poetry and stories were heard and performed not read<sup>50</sup>. Even if the works were subsequently written down, rarely would they be read privately. The first recorded reference to solitary reading is found in Aristophanes *Frogs* 52 (circa 405 BCE), in which the god Dionysus has been reading Euripides' *Andromeda* to himself. In later Ptolemaic and Roman periods this begins to change as poetry is read in the home to the guests by the *anagnostes*<sup>51</sup>. Likewise in the political arena, it was customary that speeches were delivered orally without the aid of a written script. It is later in the fifth century BCE that Pericles (440-430 BC) is said to have been the first man to

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<sup>48</sup>Xenophon's (circa 400) recollection about a cargo of books lost in a shipwreck is the earliest reference to a book trade *Anabasis* 7.5.14

<sup>49</sup>Aristophanes *The Frogs* 1114.

<sup>50</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13.

<sup>51</sup>"Anagnostes" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.80. Anagnostes were often educated slaves whose purpose was to entertain the master and guests at the table by reciting poetry. For later examples of anagnostes see Cicero A(tt). 1.12.4) who laments over the death of his reader Sosthenes and Nepos, *Atticus*, 13.3; 14.1.



use a written text when he spoke<sup>52</sup>. The preference of oral communication to written communication was due to the fact it was easier to learn to speak and quicker to use than learning to read and write. Furthermore word of mouth and public readings were the fastest means for spreading news<sup>53</sup> and propagating one's work<sup>54</sup>. People would still rather hear a written work than read it. Literacy could also be an issue here. Finally the culture valued oral speech since it was viewed as an art<sup>55</sup>. The value put on oratory increases through the Sophistic period and remains important throughout the Greco-Roman period.

Transmission of information, tradition or literature was done orally trusting in their acute memories<sup>56</sup> without using any written document. In the business world, merchants relied upon witnesses and oaths to ratify a contract not writing. Only later during the Classical period do written documents begin to be used together with human witnesses as an addition to the oral methods of ratification<sup>57</sup>. During this time priority was still given to the oral

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<sup>52</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13; Aeschylus, *Supplices* 944-51.

<sup>53</sup>Thomas makes an interesting observation that even after the printing press was invented newspapers were not a regular part of life until the eighteenth century in England; *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.10.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas O(rality, p.4) cites Lucian's reference to Herodotus who recited his Histories to large audiences in Olympia simply because it was the most efficient and economical way (Lucian, *Herodotus*, 1-2)

<sup>55</sup>Quintilian defines rhetoric as *scientia bene dicendi*, 'the science of speaking well'. Quintilian. *Quintilian*. Trans. Butler, H. E. The Loeb Classical Library. Eds. E. Capps, T. E. Page and W. H. D. Rouse. London: William Heinemann, 1922. IV.15.34,38.

<sup>56</sup>see Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* pp.30-33 concerning the role of memory.

<sup>57</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.29, 35.

contract not the written one. Historical information was passed down through the ages by means of poetry until the fifth century BC, when Ancient Greece, according to Thomas, became more 'document-minded'<sup>58</sup>. This marked the introduction of historiography. Thomas is correct when she concludes 'in the archaic period, writing was used for private inscriptions, the first written laws and many religious purposes'<sup>59</sup> but not letter-writing or books.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the ancient Greco-Roman world was predominately an oral culture<sup>60</sup> and that several factors kept it from embracing a written culture. Furthermore it was shown that letter-writing was not a widespread phenomenon but was exclusive to the slim populace of the rich and aristocracy. This next section will give the factors which created a movement toward embracing a written culture and led to an increase in the use of letter-writing. As will be seen, some of these factors are simply changes in the attitude of the culture toward the written word from the previous periods but in other cases the factors are specific events which had a direct impact upon moving the culture to a written one and leading to an increase in the use and change in the role of letter-writing.

### *Factors Creating a Movement to a Written Culture and an Increased Use of Letter-Writing*

#### Public Writings and the Polis

There were two significant movements during the sixth century BC which paved the way for an increase in letter-writing in the

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<sup>58</sup>Thomas, R. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*, p.30.

<sup>59</sup>Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13.

<sup>60</sup>Thomas, R. "Orality" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.1072.

subsequent eras. First there was a marked increase in the use of writing in public and semi public life. Harris<sup>61</sup> notes three significant areas of increase; public inscriptions of laws, the introduction of official secretaries and minted coins with abbreviated names. These show that the written word in the public arena was gaining acceptance. Second, was the development of the polis<sup>62</sup>. The first developmental stage of the polis was the introduction of the lawcode which limited the arbitrary powers of the aristocracy and quelled social conflict. The concept of citizen developed next, replete with rights and duties. With the inception of the lawcode and concept of citizenship, there was a new motivation for men and their sons to learn 'letters'<sup>63</sup> in order to participate as citizens. It was natural that the Sophistic movement began in order to meet the need of those wanting to become citizens and learn letters. It is to this topic I now turn.

### **Philosophy and Sophism<sup>64</sup>**

The fifth century BC marked the turning point for the increase in letter-writing which continued steadily through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Sophism and what is commonly referred to as the second phase of philosophy, the period from Socrates to Aristotle (5<sup>th</sup> century BC-310 BC), played an important role in the increase in letter-writing. During this period the focus of philosophy shifted to more practical matters and human affairs from the previous concerns with cosmological speculations and natural science. Also whereas the function of the teacher had been subordinate in the

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<sup>61</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.53.

<sup>62</sup>See "polis" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.1205.

<sup>63</sup>Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.63.

<sup>64</sup>For an excellent overview on Sophism and Rhetoric see Liftin, Duane. *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series. Ed. Margaret E. Thrall. Vol. 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. pp. 1-134.



previous eras, it now was emphasized<sup>65</sup>. This change in perspective was largely due initially to the influence of Socrates but was continued by his students. Socrates did not abandon or despise physical science nor did he encourage others to do likewise. But he saw the need for self understanding before or at least concomitant with understanding the world<sup>66</sup>. Thus through Socrates philosophy became more relevant and pertinent to the people because it now dealt with anthropological, ethical and practical issues. As would be expected, the demand for the writings of his teachings and that of other later philosophers increased.

The significant thing which the Sophists did was to take this moral and practical teaching and provide training for young men preparing for civic life. Protagoras, the most famous of the Sophists, offered a substitute for the former philosophy which focussed on finding the truth, even though it was considered to be in essence unattainable. Instead he offered an education in *virtue* [ἀρετή] in order to make men good citizens<sup>67</sup>. The Sophists, who were paid for their services<sup>68</sup>, supplemented these young men's education in the area of

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<sup>65</sup>"Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1002.

<sup>66</sup>This truth is illustrated in a dialogue recorded by Plato between Socrates and Phaedrus. Socrates says 'I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself; so it seems to me ridiculous, when I do not yet know that, to investigate irrelevant things. So I dismiss these matters and accepting the customary belief about them, as I was saying just now, I investigate not these things, but myself, to know whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature'. Plato *Phaedrus* London: Harvard University Press, 1914 pp. 423-425 or 229E; 230D.

<sup>67</sup>Plato, records Protagoras saying, 'what he will learn is this; such prudence in domestic concerns as will best enable him to regulate his own household; such wisdom in public affairs as will best qualify him for becoming a statesman and orator'. Plato *Protagoras* 318E.

<sup>68</sup>de Romilly, Jacqueline *Les Grands Sophistes Dans L'Athènes de Périclès* p.24. As de Romilly points out, demand to be paid was unheard of before the Sophists and considered 'un petit scandale'. For further support: see

reading, writing (including letter-writing), gymnastics and music<sup>69</sup>. Because of the Sophists, no longer was education considered to be transferred through example alone nor heredity<sup>70</sup>; it now was open to anyone who could afford it<sup>71</sup>. Thus, the number of educators and students increased, which meant a higher level of literacy and greater use of the written word (including letter-writing) in public and private life.

## Conquests of Alexander the Great

When Alexander the Great conquered new territories during the fourth century BC, he established Greek colonies by transplanting native Greeks or leaving soldiers who accompanied him on his conquests. In so doing he left the imprint of the Greek culture on the conquered territories<sup>72</sup> and he changed the political structure of the known world from city-states to a unified empire. As a result,

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Plato *Apology* 19e 'Each of these men, gentlemen, is able to go into any one of the cities and persuade the young men, who can associate for nothing with whomsoever they wish among their own fellow-citizens...to associate with them and pay them money and be grateful besides'. See also Plato *Greater Hippias* 282 C-D, where Socrates says about Gorgias 'he gained great reputation by his speaking before the Council, and in his private capacity, by giving exhibitions and associating with the young, he received a marvellous sum of money'.

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<sup>69</sup> Jackson, H. "Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1001.

<sup>70</sup> Isocrates (436-338 BC) writes 'And so far has our city [Athens sic.] distanced the rest of mankind in thought and speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world; and she has brought it about that the name 'Hellenes' suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and the title 'Hellenes' is applied to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood' trans. Norlin, George *Panegyricus* 50, Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>71</sup> de Romilly, Jacqueline *Les Grands Sophistes Dans L'Athènes de Périclès* p.24.

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, Everett *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* pp.8-9.

he required an efficient form of communication in order to rule the colonies. Formerly the King would have been largely responsible for this administrative paper-work. Instead Alexander appointed various individuals to act on his behalf. In doing so the amount of written correspondence increased as did the types of letters. Welles<sup>73</sup> shows that this phenomenon continued in the other Hellenistic kingdoms and even increased after the dissolution of Alexander's empire, particularly in Egypt.

Alexander implemented several programmes which were instrumental in changing the face of the empire and had direct and indirect effects on the increase of letter-writing. First he began an inland road building programme in order to create an infrastructure which would provide safe and efficient travel around the empire<sup>74</sup>. Though with respect to his road building programme, Casson is correct in saying 'what Alexander and his successors had begun was brought to its logical conclusion by Rome'<sup>75</sup>. By the first century AD, Rome had created an elaborate network of safe roads (guarded by Roman Centurions) connecting most of the Roman Empire. Furthermore Rome also created safe passageway by water through patrolled sea lanes. Second, Alexander imposed a common

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<sup>73</sup>Welles, C.B. *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934 p.xxxviii.

<sup>74</sup>See Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] 116-23; Chevallier, R. *Roman Roads* [1976] 181-84; Mitchell, S. RJS [1976] 106-31; Levick, B.M. *The Government of the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* [1985] 99-115; Ferguson, E. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p.17.

<sup>75</sup>Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] p.121. The known world was expanding and becoming more accessible, since from the West, Rome was beginning a series of road construction projects. These were usually the result of Roman conquests which were slowly absorbing new regions. The Via Appia [312 BC] and the Via Aemilia [187 BC] are examples of North-South expansionism in Italy and the Via Flaminia [268 BC] of East-West expansionism. The first Roman Road outside of Italy was the Via Egnatia [148 BC]. For details see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines* [1972] pp.150-159.



language<sup>76</sup>, koine Greek, on his empire enabling easy unimpeded communication<sup>77</sup>. Through these two efforts alone, new avenues of trade and commerce spawned and thus the need for additional written correspondence.

Third with the improved road service, Alexander the Great also created an organized postal service<sup>78</sup>. Formerly Greece and Rome relied on professional messengers (called *hemerodromoi* and *tabellarii*)<sup>79</sup>, friends or private slaves. But Alexander set in place an elaborate postal system based on the Persian 'pony express style'. Alexander's successors reorganized the system but it was Augustus Caesar who developed the best postal service in antiquity, called the *cursus publicus*.<sup>80</sup> Caesar built even more roads and introduced the *positus* (which were the fixed posts along the way where the courier received a new mount<sup>81</sup>). It is said that a courier could travel anywhere between 50 to 150 miles per day<sup>82</sup>. The downside of these services was that they were not for the public, though public officials often used the postal service for personal

<sup>76</sup>The reason Alexander imposed the common language was a concern for efficiency but also his concern to maintain the Greek identity amidst contact with "barbarians"; see Harris, W. *Ancient Literacy* p.138. see also Westermann, W.L. *Political Science Quarterly* 43 (1928) 364-87.

<sup>77</sup>Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, made the assumption that everyone could understand Greek if it was spoken loudly and sternly enough. Ferguson, Everett *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* p.9.

<sup>78</sup>White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.214.

<sup>79</sup>*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed., p.1233.

<sup>80</sup>for more details about the *cursus publicus* see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines* [1972] pp.207-211; Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] pp.182-190.

<sup>81</sup>Zilliaccus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post: The Troubled History of the Mail* London: William Heinemann, 1956.

<sup>82</sup>*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed., p.1233.

letters<sup>83</sup> and *cursus publicus* workers 'were not above being persuaded to accept other people's [mail sic.]'<sup>84</sup>. Private letter-writers were, in general, still dependent on finding people going to the same destination as the addressee. Despite this inconvenience, letter writing increased because travelling was safer and easier and therefore it was easier to find someone to transport a letter.

## Writing Materials

The fourth factor which aided to increase letter-writing and to move the culture to a written one was the increase in the availability of writing materials and likewise the perfection of the quality of these materials<sup>85</sup> during the Ptolemaic period. Writing materials were no longer found solely in the hands of the rich and aristocracy as in the pre-Alexander era but they were available to the general populace. Papyrus was the main writing material though parchment was becoming increasingly available too. Egypt was the main producer of papyrus and the evidence suggests<sup>86</sup> that during the Greco-Roman period the harvest and sale of this product was a state owned monopoly<sup>87</sup> which distributed their papyrus across the

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<sup>83</sup>Pliny the Younger [Pliny *Epistles* 10,120]. Pliny explains to the emperor Trajan, he had never abused the postal service but in this one case he used the government postal service in order to send his wife to her aunt upon hearing about her grandfather's death. Trajan responds [Pliny *Epistles* 10, 121] it was good he used the system and did not wait for the warrants, which Trajan would have gotten to Pliny too late. Warrants were passes issued to officials so that they could use the government postal service for private usage.

<sup>84</sup>Badian, E "Postal Service" *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 2nd ed. p.869.

<sup>85</sup>see Lewis, N. *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. pp.128ff.

<sup>86</sup>One example is PTebt III, pt.1, 709.

<sup>87</sup>White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.213.

Mediterranean seaboard<sup>88</sup>. The availability and trade of writing materials continued through to the first century AD.

## **Rhetoric and Epistolary Handbooks**

The Sophistic movement created a large interest in rhetoric which continued from the fourth century BC throughout the next several centuries because now the public wanted and could learn how to be a rhetorician. Rhetoric is the art of effective public speaking in order to persuade one's audience. Originally rhetoric was commonplace in the political assemblies and law courts. But increasingly this popular medium was applied to written works and even letters. Kennedy notes, 'since letters were considered to be one side of a conversation it is not difficult to see how the rules and subjects of rhetoric which originally were applied to oral speech were subsequently applied to written compositions'<sup>89</sup>. This had significant ramifications on the use and role of letter-writing. Not only did it mean that letters would be used more but it also meant that letters now could be used as a substitute for oral communications in order to persuade the addressees to take some action or make some judgment. Doty points to the publication of Cicero's letters as the turning point. He says

the publication of 931 letters of Cicero (106-43 BC), mostly after Cicero's death, was an event of some importance for the history of the letter, since until their appearance as a collection, no Greek or Roman had dreamed of winning by his letters the approval of educated men<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup>Ferguson, E. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p.92.

<sup>89</sup>Kennedy, George A. *Greek Rhetoric Under Christian Emperors*, p.14.

<sup>90</sup>Doty does not give support for his idea. He simply says that 'the publication of 931 letters of Cicero (106-43 BC), mostly after Cicero's death, was an event of some importance for the history of the letter, since until their appearance as a collection, no Greek or Roman had dreamed of



Doty does not support his idea so it is hard to prove or disprove whether someone used letters in a persuasive manner before him. Nevertheless what is important is that letters now were being used in a new manner, to persuade and teach. I show in a subsequent section just how important this is to NT writers in the first century AD.

It was also the rhetoricians of the Ptolemaic period who gave letter-writing credibility as an authentic and respectable form of communication by defining the 'epistolary style' in their rhetorical handbooks (e.g. *De Elocutione*, by Pseudo-Demetrius §§223-35). This provides yet one more example, in the Greco-Roman world, of the move from a strictly oral culture to a hybrid oral-written culture.

During the period between the first century BC and the second century AD, handbooks on letter-writing were created which dealt with the theoretical and practical aspects of letter-writing. The theoretical handbooks on letter-writing were probably the work of rhetoricians and included topics on style, content, structure, length and nature of letters. The practical handbooks (e.g. Pseudo-Demetrius' *Epistolary Types*) were geared toward students and show that letter-writing was becoming a basic component of education<sup>91</sup>. But these handbooks were also adapted for professional letter-writers who needed specific definitions and examples of the different letter-types in order to fulfil their job.

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winning by his letters the approval of educated men'. Doty, W.G. *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, p.2.

<sup>91</sup> Malherbe notes that Egyptian teachers provided model letters of specific letter-types for students to copy. He bases this observation on the work of Erman, A. *Die Literatur der Aegypter*. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1923. He concludes that Greek teachers followed the same example. Then he cites the examples of four model letters used as a teaching exercise found in PParis 63 as proof of this practice as early as 164 BC. See Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. pp.4,5,9-10.

Two handbooks on letter-writing exist today, Pseudo-Demetrius' *Epistolary Types* (first century BC to first century AD) and Pseudo-Libanius' *Epistolary Styles* (fourth to sixth century AD). The former contains 21 letter-types and the latter 41. The existence of these handbooks proves three things: 1) letter-writing had increased in usage; 2) the role of letter-writing had developed substantially by the first century AD and continued to do so until the fourth to sixth century AD and 3) the increase in the number of types of letters indicates that letters were being used for more and varied purposes.

## **Conclusion**

Through this paper I have shown that from the eighth century BC until the first century AD, there was a slow but definite movement to integrate the written culture into the primarily oral culture of the Greco-Roman world. I presented specific factors and events which precipitated this change. A natural by-product of this integration was a significant increase in the use of letter-writing, change in the purpose of letter-writing and a proliferation in the number of letter-types.

### *Consequences for the Early Church*

There are several consequences for the Early Church as a result of the movement from an oral culture to a hybrid oral-written culture and the concomitant increase of and expanded role of letter-writing.

### **Need of the Early Church and the Purpose of Letters**

The early church embraced letters as one of their means of communication because the purpose of letters matched their needs. One important need of the early church leaders was to communicate with those churches from which they were separated because of distance or conflict (1 Thess 2:17) or imprisonment. Separation inevitably can lead to a breakdown in relationship. For this reason in some NT letters the author writes in order to maintain his friendly relationship with his readers and to make his presence known to them when he is unable to be with them in person. Koskenniemi

refers to these as *philophronesis* and *parousia* respectively<sup>92</sup>. Koskenniemi is certainly correct in his observation and therefore it is expected that the NT letters should be somewhat dialogical in nature and used in place of personal presence. In fact this is what one finds. In Phil 1:3-8, Paul expresses his joy and love of the Philippians in letter form. These are the same words he would have used could he have been with them face to face. The reader only has one side of the conversation, that is Paul's. Elsewhere Paul makes it clear that there is no dissonance between his words and actions when he says to the Corinthian church 'what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present' (2 Cor 10:11). Paul's concept of letter-writing coincides exactly with those ideas prevailing in the first century AD. For example Demetrius defined the letter as 'one of the two sides of a dialogue...[and] should be a little more studied than a dialogue' (Demetrius, *De Elocutione* 223,224). Seneca illustrates this in his letter:

I thank you for writing to me so often; for you are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith...how much more pleasant a letter, which brings traces, real evidences, of an absent friend. For that which is sweetest when we meet face to face is afforded by the impress of a friend's hand upon his letter<sup>93</sup>.

The dialogical aspect of letter-writing is depicted in another letter of Seneca.

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<sup>92</sup>Koskenniemi, Heikki. "Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des Griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr." *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*. Vol. 102.2. Helsinki: Wiesbaden, 1956. pp.1-210.

<sup>93</sup>Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 40,1 as translated in Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.29.



I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together<sup>94</sup>.

It is not possible to determine if the NT letter-writers had read *De Elocutione* or Seneca's letters for that matter but what is evident is that the NT letter-writers have used letters in the same way they are purposed in their respective literary culture.

A second important need of the early church was the need for teaching. As the Church grew there was a paucity of leaders to teach and little teaching on how to apply the gospel to specific problems. There was clearly a strain on the first apostles. The quickest and easiest way to meet this need was the use of letters. The previous century marked a watershed moment (i.e. the publication of Cicero's letters and the use of rhetoric in letters) in which letters could now be used for persuading and teaching and not just oratory. Because letters had become culturally acceptable meant that the gospel had a chance to spread in a way it would not have been possible two centuries earlier. The early church writers embraced the attitude of the rhetoricians, namely to use the letter to persuade and teach. Paul's letters are full of examples of teaching in response to a report or a letter he has received (1 Cor 1:11; 7:1) and persuading his readers to reject some teaching (Gal 1:6-9) or group (2 Thess 3:14).

## **Language and Infrastructure**

The letter-writing activity of the early church was facilitated by the common language and road system of Rome. The imposition of the common language by Alexander the Great and continued by Rome in the first century AD allowed the early church leaders to communicate quickly to distant lands and cultures in the same

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<sup>94</sup>Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 75, 1-2 as translated in Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.29.

language. In doing so these church leaders were able to guide and direct congregations from a distance through letters.

The creation of Rome's elaborate safe road network and postal service, *cursus publicus*, were key factors which made the letter the obvious means of communication for the fledgling Christian movement. This is not to say that messengers were not also used for it is clear that the NT writers used messengers to carry their letters. In fact the NT messengers were most probably used to pass on additional thoughts of the author to the recipients (Eph 6:20-21; Col 4:7-8<sup>95</sup>). But the advantage of sending a letter instead of an oral message is that the recipients could have a written document which they could keep. The written document could be presented to the opposing parties or to the undisciplined person etc. in order to show the position of the NT leaders on the matter. Also it has been suggested that a written letter could also serve the liturgical needs of the church<sup>96</sup>. But probably more important is that these letters could then be further circulated. The common language enabled a letter to be read by different communities and thereby expanded their repertoire of teaching. In Col 4:16, Paul encourages the Colossians to give their letter to the Laodiceans to read and *vice versa*.

## Letter-types

It has been clearly shown that the increase in letter-writing led to an increase in the types of letters which could be written. The NT is a case in point since it includes several different types of letters. Stowers has classified several letters according to the categories found in Demetrius' *De Elocutione* and Libanius' *Epistolary*

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<sup>95</sup>Note following quotation from a letter cited by White: 'The rest please learn from the man who brings you the letter. For he is no stranger to us'. White, John L. *Light From Ancient Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. p.216.

<sup>96</sup>Champion, L.G. "Benedictions and Doxologies in the Epistles of Paul." Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde. Ruprecht-Karls-Universität zu Heidelberg, 1934.

*Styles*<sup>97</sup>. Though it is appropriate to categorise an entire letter in this way, Malherbe is certainly correct to say that the letter-types listed in these two works provides a 'collection of styles appropriate to different circumstances and a guide to the tone in which letters are to be written'<sup>98</sup>. Therefore within a letter there may be in fact several different 'letter-types'. A quick examination of the NT letters shows that this is true. Advice is used in 1 Cor 5:1-13. In six of the seven letters in Revelation there is a combination of praise and admonition letter-types. This suggests that the NT writers were well aware of contemporary epistolary theory, whether through exposure to the epistolary handbooks in circulation or to the education system it is impossible to tell. But their awareness of different letter-types meant that they were able to create letters which were focussed to the need of the readers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that letter-writing played a significant role in the development and nurture of the Early Church given the fact that 20 of the 27 books of the NT are letters. The increase in letter-writing and the change in the role of letter-writing leading up to the first century AD were in part responsible for enabling the New Testament letters to have the tremendous impact they did.

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<sup>97</sup>See Stowers, Stanley K. *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986. pp.91ff.

<sup>98</sup>Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.4.



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Craig A. Smith

## THE STAR OF MESSIAH

*Robert S. McIvor*

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Matthew 2:2 records the words of the Magi: "We have seen *his* star". This article considers theories by prominent astronomers who attempt to explain the Star and how it was recognized. What was the Star? Was this astrology or messianic prophecy?

### INTRODUCTION

The Magi witnessed a star that they somehow recognized as "his" star and it prompted their historic journey to Palestine in search of a newborn king of the Jews. On the last leg of their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem they witnessed the star a second time. Two issues surround the star. What exactly was it? And, just how did the Magi identify it as "his" star? These present a real challenge because Matthew is the only source for the story and his account is silent on both issues. Few scholars have attempted to explain both the star and how the Magi recognized it as "his" star.

### Astronomer John Kepler And Astrology

In 1614, the famous German astronomer John Kepler suggested that the Magi used astrology to recognize "his" star and he thought a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC might have inspired their trip to Palestine (Caspar, 1993). Then, later, on their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, they witnessed a nova, a star that suddenly flares up in brilliance like the nova Kepler had witnessed in 1604. Kepler speculated that ancient astrologers would see Jupiter as a king of planets and might associate Saturn with the Jews since their Sabbath was Saturn's day. Kepler was the first in history to invoke astrology to explain "his" star. Hughes (1979) has recently revived this theory. The proposal is attractive but it has several flaws. Planetary conjunctions repeat every few decades and a close conjunction of these same planets had occurred in 66BC (Pritchard, 1856), yet this earlier event had not prompted the Magi to journey to Palestine. So, why would a conjunction in 7BC inspire such a journey when an earlier conjunction had not? Furthermore, at

closest conjunction in 7BC, these planets were still one degree apart (equivalent to two diameters of the moon), and it seems unlikely that regular sky observers would describe such a conjunction as a "star". In addition, Kepler's imaginative astrology associating Jupiter with a king and Saturn with the Jews is 17<sup>th</sup> century astrology, but he could not demonstrate that this had also been the astrology of the Magi around the time of Christ's birth.

### **Astronomer Knut Lundmark And Messianic Prophecy**

In 1953, Swedish astronomer Knut Lundmark offered a different approach that avoided astrology altogether (Lundmark, 1953). He suggested that the Magi had witnessed a brilliant nova while they were in their homeland, and it was this same nova they witnessed again months later when they made their trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. To explain how the Magi recognized a nova as "his" star, Lundmark researched the origin and development of the messianic idea in Israel. He felt that an ancient oracle in the Jewish Torah at Numbers 24:17 had shaped and transformed messianic expectations by connecting a star with a Jewish ruler who was to be the messiah. Lundmark described how Balaam, a contemporary of Moses, had "glimpsed the coming Messianic era" and predicted "the Messiah Star". For Lundmark, the Magi reference to "his" star meant Messiah's star. Messianic prophecy and a nova as its fulfillment can be traced back to the earliest Christian writings and paintings.

### **Messiah's Star**

From the earliest times, Christian authors insisted that the Magi had recognized the star through messianic prophecy. Justin Martyr (100-165) in *Dial.*106: "Moses revealed that the same man (Jesus) would arise as a star by means of the race of Abraham when he said, A star shall arise out of Jacob and a ruler out of Israel." Irenaeus (130-200) in *Adv. Haer.* 3.9.3 (Harvey ii.31): "Of Christ's star also Balaam for his part did thus prophecy, A star shall be drawn out of Jacob, and a chief out of Israel." Origen (185-254) in *c. Celsum* 1.61: "The star which appeared at the birth of Jesus was prophesied by Balaam, as Moses recorded, A star shall appear out of Jacob, and a man shall rise up out of Israel. I think the Magi had the



prophecies of Balaam, and they guessed the man foretold by the star had arrived.” Eusebius (260-339) in *Dem. Ev.* 9.1: “Balaam’s prediction of the star was most likely preserved among the Magi.” Athanasius (296-373) in *Incarn. Verbi Dei* 33: “Moses recognized the importance and truth of the matter (of Christ’s coming). ‘There shall arise a star from Jacob and a man from Israel.’” Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in *In diem natalem Christi* (PM46:1133D): “Behold how the Magi, who stem from Balaam, observed, according to his prophecy, the newly appointed star.” Jerome (345-420) in *Comm. In Matth.*: “The star rose in the East as Balaam prophesied to his successors who recognized it by prophetic means.”

The Christian use of this text as messianic was consistent with ancient Jewish scholarship. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in Alexandria in Egypt in a version known as the Septuagint. It rendered the text at Numbers 24:17: “A Star shall rise out of Jacob, A Man (ἄνθρωπος) shall spring out of Israel.” The modern *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971) considers this Septuagint translation “the first messianic interpretation of any biblical verse in history”. In a later translation of the Torah into Aramaic, the reference is unambiguous: “A King shall arise out of Jacob, And the Messiah be anointed from Israel.” Balaam’s oracle connects the star and the ruler so intimately that the Jews called the star ‘the Star of Messiah’ and they called the expected ruler Bar Kokhba or ‘Son of the Star’. Edersheim (1906) quotes from two ancient Jewish commentaries. The *Messiah-Haggadah* expected “the Star of Messiah would shine forth from the east two years before his coming”, and the *Book of Elijah* speculated that “the Star would appear in the east two years before the birth of Messiah” (A. Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash* [Leipzig & Vienna 1853-1878]). The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, have provided some insight into the Jewish community at Qumran around the time of Christ’s birth, and there, this text of Numbers 24:17 formed part of an anthology of scriptures used concerning the Messiah (CD 7.18-26; cf T Levi 18:3; T Judah 24:1). A modern Jewish scholar acknowledges that Numbers 24:17 was one of several “scriptural texts considered as the foundation of the Messianic teachings” at Qumran (Vermes, 1978). Even as late as 132AD, there is evidence of this star/messiah connection in Palestine, when the commander of

a rebellion against Roman occupation assumed the “messianic” title Bar Kokhba or Son of the Star and issued coins that display a star above the temple mount (Yadin, 1971). Numbers 24:17 has a history of messianic interpretation among the Jews between 300BC and 132AD.

## A Brilliant Nova

Several early Christian authors explicitly identified the Star of Bethlehem as a nova. Ignatius (35-107) in *Eph.* 19.2: “A star in the heavens outshone all the stars and its newness (*nova*) caused astonishment.” The *Protevangelium* of James (circa 150) 15.7 attributes the following words to the Magi: “We saw a very great star shining among the stars and dimming them.” Origen (185-254) in *c. Celsus* 1.58: “It was a new star (*nova stella*) unlike any of the other well-known bodies.” Eusebius (260-339) in *Dem. Ev.* 9.5: “The star was new (*nova*) and a stranger among the usual lights of heaven. It was not one of the many known stars.” Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in *In diem natalem Christi*: “...the Magi observed the newly appointed star.” A nova was the earliest explanation for the star. It is considered the best explanation among modern astronomers. George Gamow (1940), a professor of theoretical physics at George Washington University, remarks that “extremely bright novae may be found in ancient history, and in particular, it is very possible that the Star of Bethlehem represented one of these cosmic catastrophes.” Arthur C. Clarke (1980), world-recognized through his popular television series, says: “For a serious astronomical explanation of the Star of Bethlehem, my favourite theory is that it was a supernova.” Astronomer James Mullaney wrote in the *Science Digest* of 1975: “The considered opinion of nearly all who have studied the question is that a nova or supernova seems the most likely explanation for the Christmas Star of all those put forth to date.”

A nova is a star that suddenly erupts into brilliance with spectacular rays of light radiating in all directions. To an observer, it seems to burst onto the scene at a sky location where no star was visible before, and to the observer, it seems like a new star. The star was too dim to be seen before its eruption; then it explodes in a display of brilliance; and then it gradually fades from sight over a period of

some months. Simply put, a nova is an exploding sun. These are rare events and only a few have been documented in the history of astronomy. A nova was recorded in China in 1054, initially visible for 23 days during daylight, and it outshone all the stars for two months, and then gradually faded away after 22 months. A nova was recorded in 1572 and it was also visible during daylight for the first 10 days and dominated the sky for several weeks, and it vanished from sight after 15 months. Kepler had witnessed a nova in 1604 and it was a little brighter than Jupiter and it faded away in 12 months.

In Lundmark's view, the Magi had witnessed a brilliant nova of this kind in their homeland of Mesopotamia or Persia. They had access to the Torah where they read in Balaam's oracle that a future star was expected to accompany a future Jewish ruler. "A star *shall* rise" were the words of the oracle, and they would take this to infer the appearance of a new star or nova. They concluded: "we have seen messiah's star". Months later, after traveling to Palestine, they saw the same nova again as they made the six-mile trip from Jerusalem to the tiny village of Bethlehem.

### **Catacomb Paintings**

This story is illustrated in paintings in the underground catacombs in Rome where many Christians were buried in the early centuries of this era. The star is always shown as a single point of light with brilliant rays in all directions (Photo 1), and never depicted as two points of light like a conjunction of planets or as a comet with a tail. In one catacomb painting, four of the Magi stand and listen attentively to an elderly man who is seated as he reads from an open scroll. A faint halo can be seen around his head for he represents a holy man (Moses), who reads from his Torah scroll, likely open at the Oracles of Balaam. One of the Magi, on the left, points to a brilliant star overhead (Photo 2). The same theme appears in the famous nativity painting in the Priscilla catacomb that has been dated to about 150. One of the Magi stands before a mother who is seated as she nurses her infant. The baby seems startled by the presence of the astronomer who points skyward to a brilliant star overhead. In his left hand, we can make out the circular outline of a Torah scroll. The astronomer is pointing to the star as the Star of



Messiah and explaining to the mother from Numbers 24:17 that her son is Bar Kokhba, 'Son of the Star' (Photo 3).

### **A work of fiction?**

Astronomers who offer explanations for the Star of Bethlehem take Matthew's story of the magi and the star as authentic history. In contrast, a modern theologian views it as a work of fiction. Brown (1977) writes: "Some of the events, which are quite implausible as history, have now been understood as rewritings of OT scenes and themes. For instance, Matthew's story of the Magi who saw the star of the Davidic Messiah at its rising is an echo of the OT story of Balaam, a type of magus from the East, who saw the star rise out of Jacob." Brown ascribes Matthew's gospel to an unknown author who took Mark's gospel and embellished it and prefaced it with a birth narrative of his own composition. However, according to Brown, the author was not writing history. The nativity scene with the magi and the star existed only in his imagination. Brown has no need to explain the star, for he has explained it away. In reviewing astronomical theories for the star, he concedes that a new star "corresponds literally to Matthew's description" but he feels "the theory of a 'new star' is purely a guess."

In regards to the star, it matters little whether the apostle Matthew wrote the book that bears his name. The fact is that this gospel was produced between 65 and 85 by someone (whether by Matthew or not) who had information about a star appearance that attracted the attention of sky observers around the time of Christ's birth. A few decades later, Ignatius also had information about a star at Christ's birth, and his information was clearly independent of Matthew, for he relates that it was a spectacular nova that outshone all the stars. The author of the *Protevangelium* had similar information. And Origen and Eusebius. If Matthew's gospel had never been written, the information in Ignatius and Origen and Eusebius is more than adequate to raise the prospect of a nova appearance near Christ's birth.

The subject of exploding stars is of special interest in modern astronomy. The discipline of astrophysics (the study of the interior of stars) is only a few decades old. The first pulsar was detected as

recently as 1967, and, it so happens, by an astronomy graduate with an Ulster accent. A pulsar is the collapsed core of a star that exploded sometime in the past. Over 500 pulsars have now been identified and the count continues. Most were formed vast ages ago. One has been identified as the remnant of the nova recorded by the Chinese in 1054. It is possible that astronomers will identify one of these pulsars as the remnant of a nova that dominated the night sky two thousand years ago. The nova theory still holds promise. It can still fire the imagination.

PHOTO 1. This is the earliest nativity scene and it is in the Priscilla Catacomb at 430 Via Salaria, Rome. Circa 150. Mary is seated nursing her newborn. The baby seems frightened by the presence of one of the Magi, who stands with a scroll in his left hand as he points to a brilliant star overhead. (McIvor, 1988)



PHOTO 2. . This painting in the Catacomb of Via Latina at 258 Via Latina, Rome, depicts one of the Magi pointing to the Star with rays of light shooting in all directions. Circa 320. (McIvor, 1988)



PHOTO 3. This painting in the Catacomb of Marcus & Marcellianus on the Via Ardeatine, Rome, shows four magi listening to the Torah. The one on the left points to a star with blazing rays. Circa 250. (McIvor, 1988)





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Robert S. McIvor  
14 – 250 Pemberton Terrace  
Kamloops, BC  
Canada V2C 6A9

## Significant Nuances in Contemporary Pauline Interpretation<sup>\*</sup>

*William S. Campbell*

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The last half century has witnessed great changes in the scholarly image of Paul. His Jewish roots have been rediscovered by scholars such as W D Davies. His Damascus road experience has been stressed as a call to preach the Gospel to gentiles without this being interpreted as involving hostility to his fellow Jews. The apostle's pastoral relation with the gentile churches has been reassessed emphasizing both Paul's concern for his converts and his continuing links with the Jerusalem apostles and the mission to Jews. In interpreting the contents of the letters of Paul, their particularity as letters to individual churches with varying contexts is now increasingly recognized with a corresponding awareness of the dangers of generalizing and universalizing Paul's statements

Although there is a general consensus that great changes have occurred in Pauline interpretation in the last half century, there is less agreement as to what are the most significant of these changes and to what extent they should be affirmed or deplored. This essay is an attempt to outline one scholar's view of these developments and to evaluate their contribution.

Our starting point will be the period immediately after the Second World War when W D Davies challenged the view of Paul as a Hellenizer, someone who would bring the broader more humanistic, universalistic insights of Hellenism to a narrow

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<sup>\*</sup> This paper was read at the Postgraduate Biblical Seminar, University of Manchester on 19th December, 2002.

tribalistic Torah-centred Judaism.<sup>1</sup> The basic issue is where to locate Paul intellectually, ideologically and spiritually. Is his native ground the Diaspora Judaism of Tarsus influenced by a pervasive Greek spirit or did he spend even his early youth in Jerusalem, as van Unnik was to argue in a famous study in 1962?<sup>2</sup>

That Paul knew and spoke both Aramaic and Greek cannot be disputed. Whether he acquired both from childhood or one only later is still an important issue even after the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of W D Davies' book. Even so, it still may be questioned whether Paul thought in Greek or in Aramaic. Perhaps we should inquire whether in his dreams Aramaic or Greek was the language of communication! Martin Hengel in his major work has demonstrated that there was extensive Greek influence on First Century Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Ongoing archaeological studies confirm this. So it seems that in the Mediterranean world at this time, there were no such entities as 'pure Judaism' or 'pure Hellenism', only a confluence of both, and perhaps Paul himself was a "confluence of ideas, motifs and practices of almost any provenance".<sup>4</sup>

However realistic this view of Paul may seem, it is no solution since, in this scenario, the Apostle is decontextualised so that his particular historical identity is fused into the generalities of cross-cultural fertilization. He suffers the same fate as frequently occurs with the statements in his letters, being both decontextualized and

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<sup>1</sup> Davies W.D., *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Elements in Pauline Theology*. Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, Mifflintown,PA: Sigler Press 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Van Unnik W.C., *Tarsus or Jerusalem: The City of Paul's Youth*. London: Epworth Press 1962.

<sup>3</sup> *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in the Early Hellenistic Period* Vols 1-11, ET London: SCM, 1974, esp. ch 111 and IV.4.

<sup>4</sup> Engberg-Pedersen Troels (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*. Louisville KY: John Knox Press 2001, pp.16-17.

generalized. Andrie Du Toit insists that the view that Paul “ was thinking in Aramaic while writing in Greek cannot be sustained” (p16)<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Davies and others emphasize, there can be no doubt that Paul was nurtured through, and sustained by, a devout interaction with Torah as illuminated by Jewish exegetical methods and styles of argumentation. If much of this was memorized, can we be sure in which language? Perhaps neither geography nor language will explain the reality of Paul, the Jewish apostle to gentiles! Other insights may prove relevant and important here. Identity is certainly influenced by the language of communication, but dual identity is a reality in modern life as illustrated by German Jews of the Nineteenth Century, or by some second generation Moslems in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

It would appear that we cannot in the last resort ignore Paul’s own self-designations whether as a Hebrew or as an Israelite and that we should at least allow for the possibility that however conversant he was with Greek life and culture, this was not necessarily the ground of his being. To separate Paul from his Jewish roots in any kind of dichotomy is to lose this very particular First Century figure in an intellectual haze that does not assist clarification but rather adds confusion. To this extent, scholarship remains indebted to W D Davies.

We have already noted the issue of how Paul’s statements are to be interpreted. The tendency in the early post-war years was to regard Paul as being primarily a theologian. Johannes Munck rejected this view in favour of Paul the missionary with an eschatological agenda.<sup>7</sup> The tendency, however, was not easily dismissed. The question for some was not whether but only how Paul’s words were

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<sup>5</sup> “A Tale of Two Cities: ‘Tarsus or Jerusalem’ Revisited”, *Journal of New Testament Studies* 2002, vol 48, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> On dual identity see Mendes – Flohr Paul, *German Jews, A Dual Identity*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1999.

<sup>7</sup> *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, London: SCM Press, 1959, see esp pp. 43ff.



to be viewed as theology. TW Manson's essay which had inspired Munck's view of Paul, had described Romans as a missionary's reflections upon, and concluding summary of Paul's missionary work in the East.<sup>8</sup> In an essay in the early 1960's Guenther Bornkamm elaborated further on this in a revealing statement, "...in Romans, the ideas and motifs enumerated are not found, as in the earlier letters, in disconnection and as bearing on this or that actual situation. They are reasoned out, substantiated more fully and in detail, and given universal application."<sup>9</sup> Thus, from this era on, the question of the interpretation of Romans and the nature of Paul's letters and how to interpret them were to proceed hand in hand since they had been, and continued to be, perceived as inextricably related.

Johannes Munck had reacted strongly against the Tübingen School and its implicit Hegelianism.<sup>10</sup> As Margaret Mitchell has noted, interpreters tend to paint their portrayal of Paul in reaction to previous popular depictions.<sup>11</sup> In order to undermine the Tübingen School's established framework, Munck challenged both the nature of Paul's letters in general and of Romans in particular. Munck insisted that Paul's letters were to be interpreted as such and this means that statements from Acts and elsewhere may only be used if they do not clearly contradict what is found in the letters, nor should such extraneous material determine the exposition of the letters.

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<sup>8</sup> "St Paul's letters to the Romans - and Others", Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 31, 1948, pp. 224-40, now reprinted in *The Romans Debate* revised and expanded edition, ed K P Donfried, Peabody MA: Hendricksons 1991, pp.3-15.

<sup>9</sup> *Paul*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, pp.94-95, now included in *The Romans Debate* (see n.7 above) pp.16-28 with a modified form of this statement, (see pp.37-38).

<sup>10</sup> See esp. chapter 3 of Munck's book, "The Tübingen School and Paul, pp.69-86.

<sup>11</sup> *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Interpretation*, Tübingen: Mohr, 2000, see esp. pp.422-425.

Paul's individual letters, and the situation that forms the background of each individual letter, must be viewed on their own merits in each case. Indeed the material in the letters and behind these supposed situations may be unified only if such a procedure does not violate the individual nature of a particular letter and the situation that lies behind it.

Any historical situation, such as a situation that is the background of a particular Pauline letter, despite the fact that it may not be the expression of a clearly systematized theological position, is nevertheless historical and its historical character must not be disregarded.

Munck's stress was on the particularity of the situation of each of Paul's letters including Romans. These particular documents should not be abstracted from their particular context to form part of any generalized or universal theological system. Munck's Paul is not a systematician,<sup>12</sup> but his insights have been respected and have opened the way to a better appreciation of Paul's writings as real letters with specific addressees. As a result of this insight into the nature of his letters, Paul's theology can no longer be simply abstracted en bloc from his letters, nor can Romans be viewed merely as its summary. Krister Stendahl elaborated further on Munck's proposals, stressing that Paul's letters were first century texts about first century issues and that they were not to be read as discussions about the general human predicament as seen through Augustinian and Lutheran spectacles. They deal with the specific issues of two peoples, Jews and gentiles rather than the individual and his sins.<sup>13</sup>

In reaction to the specificity of Paul's letters, there was a fear amongst some biblical scholars that these foundational documents

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<sup>12</sup> See esp. Munck's comment, "We misunderstand Paul much more fatally if, as has been usual, we regard him as a theologian", op.cit. p.65.

<sup>13</sup> *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, London: SCM Press, 1976, pp.4f and 78ff. Stendahl here follows Munck who had stressed that Paul thought in terms not of individuals but of nations (Munck p.53f., 277f.)

were now to be regarded as relativised and ad hoc statements of ancient history, resulting in a “sociological captivity” for Paul’s thought. On the other hand, creedal, dogmatic formulations or a dogmatic dialectic of cross and resurrection could result in captivity to an imposed, perceived centre in Paul’s thinking. This matter was clarified by some excellent work by J Christiaan Beker<sup>14</sup> who sought to stress both the occasional, contingent elements in the letters and the abiding coherence that enabled them to point to the theology of the Apostle. By coherence Beker meant “the stable, constant element which expresses the convictional basis of Paul’s proclamation of the gospel...the truth of the gospel” . Apocalyptic *motifs* dominate Paul’s thought – “Paul’s modifications of the Christian tradition are not due to Hellenistic-Jewish or Philonic influences but are modifications of an *apocalyptic substratum*.”<sup>15</sup>

According to Beker, Paul’s statements really are coherent when correctly viewed despite the recognition of their very real contingency and despite the fact that the “centre of Paul’s thought transcends every instance of its expression.” Instead of suggesting that these time-related statements have somehow to be lifted above the level of everyday reality to some suprahistorical abstract plane, in Beker’s view, for Paul it is just such situations that are fertile for theologising since he is best described as a hermeneutical theologian. “It is Paul’s interpretive achievement that he combines particularity and universality, or diversity and unity, in such a way that the gospel is neither simply *imposed* on historical situations as a ready-made orthodox system, nor *fragmented* into fortuitous and incidental intentions of thought”.<sup>16</sup> By this approach Beker seeks to retain the stress on the particularity of the letters and at the same

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<sup>14</sup> “Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Model”, *Pauline Theology* Vol.1, ed. J M Bassler, Minneapolis MI:1991, pp.15-24.

<sup>15</sup> “Recasting Pauline Theology”, p.17.

<sup>16</sup> *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, p.351

time to respect the desire to cling to some understanding of Paul as a theologian. His view of Paul's hermeneutical activity in transforming both traditions and scriptural interpretation provides a valid model of continuity (and discontinuity) between Paul and his Jewish predecessors in the broadest sense, i.e with both Christ-believing and non-Christ-believing Jews. Regarding Paul as both an interpreter of scripture and of earlier traditions avoids the image of Paul in reaction to his ancestral faith and helps to understand better the unity and diversity of the New Testament and its relation to the Jewish scriptures.

As W D Davies noted, there had been a dominant tendency in Pauline scholarship to contrast rather than to compare Paul with Jewish ways of thinking. Johannes Munck was dedicated to opposing the latent Hegelianism of the Tübingen School stressing particularity over against the latter's concern with universality. For Munck, the posited "opposition between particularism and universalism is the product of a modern cosmopolitan outlook, and has nothing to do with the biblical conception of the mission" (of Paul) <sup>17</sup> But the Nineteenth Century view of Paul was itself also partly the outcome of centuries of Christian self-definition over against Judaism. Judaism had long been used as a negative foil by Christians, "making Judaism a code word for all wrong attitudes toward God".<sup>18</sup> This pattern had in certain ways been strengthened by the Lutheran understanding of justification with its strong opposition to works. It was this aspect of Judaism that EP Sanders chose to address in his major work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*; Sanders research into the Judaism of Paul's time revealed that contrary to Christian stereotyping, Palestinian Judaism was a religion of grace and faith-what Sanders described as covenantal nomism. Obedience to the Law is still acknowledged as of the essence of Judaism, but for Sanders, "obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it

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<sup>17</sup> Cf Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, p.71, (Munck is citing B.Sundkler's article of 1936).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, p.132.



does not earn God's grace as such...Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the elect"<sup>19</sup>. In Sanders' view, Luther had made the mistake of regarding the First Century Jewish opponents of Paul as similar to his unreformed opponents of the Sixteenth Century. The result was that later attitudes to faith and works were wrongly attributed to First Century Judaism to the detriment of the latter. Sanders' thesis has not been universally welcomed, but it has gained wide acceptance.<sup>20</sup>

There can be no doubt that he has demonstrated convincingly that inner Christian disputes over law and grace have coloured our perspectives on Judaism and prevented impartiality. His attempt to explain Paul's alleged departure from Judaism is particularly interesting. According to Sanders, Paul did not have problems with Judaism prior to his conversion but his post-conversion perspective was that Judaism was deficient simply because it was not Christianity. JDG Dunn criticized this thesis since it gave no real explanation for Paul's alleged departure from Judaism. Though aware of the implicit anti-Judaism in some pre-Sanders New Testament interpretation, Dunn, however asserts.... "this presentation of Paul is only a little better than the one rejected. There remains something very odd in Paul's attitude to his ancestral faith. The Lutheran Paul has been replaced by an idiosyncratic Paul who in arbitrary and irrational manner turns his face against the glory and greatness of Judaism's covenant theology and abandons Judaism simply because it is not Christianity".<sup>21</sup>Dunn did not

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<sup>19</sup> *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, London: SCM 1977, pp.75, 420 and 544. On Sanders' views of Paul see further in my *Paul's Gospel in an Intercultural Context: Jew and Gentile in the Letter to the Romans*, Frankfurt, New York: Peter Lang, 1992, pp.133ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. CH Talbert, "Paul, Judaism and the Revisionists", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1 2001, pp.1-22.

<sup>21</sup> "The New Perspective on Paul", the Manson Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Manchester, November 1982, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65/1983 pp. 96-122 (101) Reprinted in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, London, SPCK, 1990,

hesitate to criticize First Century Judaism, at least in part. The failure was that in the dominant Judaism of that period those aspects which separated Jews from others had been given exaggerated significance so that circumcision, sabbath and food laws became as it were the identity badges of true Judaism.

Dunn's appreciation of Judaism emerged in his claim that justification was a Jewish doctrine, and not specifically Christian, and thus there could be no inherent obstacle to believers being Jewish. However, he went on to argue that at Antioch, after his debate with Peter, Paul realised that faith in Christ alone was essential and that keeping the law was thereby rendered superfluous.<sup>22</sup> In this claim, Dunn not only supports an image of Paul as an independent or sectarian apostle who at a certain point separated from Peter and other Jewish Christians thereby making his own gentile form of Christianity the norm for the whole church, but he fails to allow space for Jewish believers to retain their Jewish identity in Christ. In this respect Dunn is, I believe, open to criticism. It is quite clear from Romans 14-15 that Paul recognizes and supports Jewish believers in their freedom to maintain a lasting Jewish life-style and identity. Paul thereby refuses to universalise gentile Christian identity as the norm for the whole church-what he seeks is unity in diversity, not a monochrome gentile Christianity. Paul did not advise a temporary toleration of Judaism but, on the contrary, allowed for abiding diversity in the church. Surprising or trite as it may seem, to be the apostle to the gentiles did not mean that Paul was biased in favour of gentiles.<sup>23</sup>

What we have just claimed concerning diversity in Paul may seem to be in contradiction of Gal 3:28 where Paul apparently asserts the end of ethnic and other distinctions in Christ. That this ending of such distinctions did not actually take place in New Testament times

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<sup>22</sup> "The New Perspective on Paul", p.113.

<sup>23</sup> See my essay, "Divergent Images of Paul and his Mission", *Reading Israel in Romans* ed. C Grenholm & D Patte in the Series *Romans through History and Culture, Reception and Critical Interpretation*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 1999, pp.259-86.

is significant, and Paul also says, “ Let each of you remain in ‘the condition in which you were called’” (1Cor.7: 20). That Jewish Christianity gradually decreased is a fact of history, but to claim it is superfluous or to unwillingly tolerate its temporary continuance is pro-gentile bias. Paul did disagree with Peter on occasions as others probably did as well, but that does not mean that he opposed Peter’s mission to the Jews or that he ceased to recognize Peter and other law-abiding Jewish Christians as equal partners in Christ. To be one in Christ does not mean that all ethnic and other distinctions are abolished, but rather that discrimination on the basis of difference is to be abolished. To be one in Christ actually implies already existing differences. What Paul seeks is oneness rather than sameness among believers. As Pamela Eisenbaum states, “Paul does not relegate Jewishness to a lower order of being; it is his interpreters who do that....I do not think Paul preaches the collapse of all human difference; this interpretation is simply a more benign expression of Christian imperialism..”<sup>24</sup>

The abiding difference between Jews and gentiles is illustrated by the fact that Paul reserves the title Israel for Jewish believers despite his parallel emphasis upon equality between Jew and gentile in Christ.’ The church is not explicitly described as ‘new Israel’ by Paul or elsewhere in the New Testament-only from 160CE can we find such a conception.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the fact that Paul acknowledges and respects differences between Jew and gentile, means that contrary to some critiques of him, he does not hold to the view that the ideal Christ believer is a law-free male gentile. The supposed abolition of differences has not freed Paul from his image as a male chauvinist. However, if Paul allows and supports real diversity in his communities, then this opens the way for a more significant role for women since they no longer need to be judged by male

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<sup>24</sup> “ Is Paul the father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?” *Crosscurrents* Vol 50,no 4,pp.506-524 (524).

<sup>25</sup> See my article on Israel in *The Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. G Hawthorne, RP Martin & D G Reid, Downers Grove,IL, Intervarsity Press, 1995, pp. 441-446.

standards and expectations, being different from men.<sup>26</sup> Indeed when we look at Paul's letters carefully, we can see that he both acknowledges women and gives them significance in his work. Phoebe was not only the bearer of Paul's most important letter, but presumably as such was also authorised to explain its contents to the believers in Rome. The image of the family, so basic in Paul is further evidence of his recognition of difference-believers as male and female are to become part of one family, the family of Abraham. To be part of a family implies recognition of difference within an overarching framework of equality and belonging.

In my view it is quite significant that Daniel Boyarin has criticized Paul for advocating sameness rather than diversity in Christ. This alleged flawed opinion is in fact the view of Paul's interpreters rather than of Paul himself. Paul has suffered greatly from his interpreters and recent perspectives have begun to correct this. When this fresh understanding is reapplied by feminist scholars to Paul's letters, I am sure that Paul will emerge as much closer to feminist goals since he is biased in favour of the weak and powerless and seeks the good of everyone in the community of faith. If we continue to view Paul as advocating the removal of differences, this is very similar to the "Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy".<sup>27</sup> On this view Paul is too much a servant of Hellenism rather than its critic.

Part of the reason for a certain naivete regarding Paul's relation to the Empire, springs I am sure because his opposition has, in the past, tended to be seen as Jewish. As Guenther Bornkamm put it, "Paul's opponent is not this or that section in a particular church, but the Jews and their understanding of salvation".<sup>28</sup> But opposition

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<sup>26</sup> See the as yet unpublished thesis by Kathy Ehrensperger, "Feminist Interpretation of Paul and Changing Perspectives in Pauline Studies", presented to the University of Wales, Lampeter 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Cf Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley: University of California 1994, p.7.

<sup>28</sup> *Paul*, p.95.



to Jewish ethnocentrism does not explain Paul adequately. Neil Elliott perceptively notes in commenting on a recent publication by John Barclay that although “Hellenistic and Roman imperialism is in view through the rest of Barclay’s work, it is primarily against Jewish “nationalistic presuppositions” or “ ethnic restrictions” that he sees Paul to be struggling. True, Paul’s apocalyptic perspective still regards the non-Jewish world as a “cess-pit of godlessness and vice (Rom.:18-32; Phil. 2:15)...but Barclay has gone so far as to refer to ‘Jewish’ cultural imperialism” as the horizon against which Paul must be read.”<sup>29</sup>

More recent studies regard Paul as very aware of and as certainly not neutral towards the Roman Empire and its practices. Paula Fredriksen claims that under imperial rule, “the open dissemination of a Messianic message... put the entire Jewish community at risk.”. Even Paul’s conversion may be highly political. The *Judaismos* in which Paul says he had advanced (Gal.1:14) was “not merely a matter of religious observance but a movement of political activism and autonomy by diaspora Jews” Thus Saul’s ‘zeal’ was directed toward “ the end of ensuring community solidarity and security in Damascus” against “ the specific political threat” posed to the larger Jewish community by the Jesus movement”.<sup>30</sup>

It is quite unlikely that someone previously so politically aware should suddenly become so neutral towards or indifferent to the wider political context. There are numerous texts in Paul whose significance in this regard has only recently begun to be appreciated. The fact that Paul borrows a technical term for news of victory, *euangelion*, to designate his gospel may in fact signify that

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<sup>29</sup> “ Paul and the Politics of Empire”, *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Krister Stendahl*, ed Richard A Horsley, Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2000, pp. 17-39 (p.21f.).

<sup>30</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “ Judaism, The Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1and 2 “, *Journal of Theological studies* 42:2 (1991) p.556.f.

Paul implicitly parodies the theological claims made on behalf of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, language in other words calculated to be politically provocative. F W Danker has argued that Paul's conception of God had been shaped in contrast to the ubiquitous Greco-Roman symbolization of the Emperor as *Benefactor*.<sup>31</sup> Again, Neil Elliott claims that Paul's "warning of doom when others proclaim" peace and security"(1Thess.5:3) is widely regarded as a not-so-cryptic critique of the Roman world after the establishment of the Principate".<sup>32</sup>

There are of course many scholars who, for diverse reasons, do not stress Paul's political awareness. Even those well versed in the forms of imperial rhetoric and convention and able to discuss with some expertise the rhetoric of Paul's letters do not always demonstrate new insights on Paul and his context. This may be because rhetoric is viewed by some as a purely neutral medium of communication. Thus the rhetorical expertise is somehow dissipated because it is used to give fresh shape to old and out-dated opinions. An interesting example is in Margaret Mitchell's description of Pauline portraits in the present century as being "situated in a museum haunted by a face that doesn't deserve a picture, but nonetheless dominates the scene and the viewing experience totally"<sup>33</sup>. We find here along with the imagery of viewing portraits, a somewhat disengaged, dispassionate scholarship both in relation to Chrysostom and to Hitler as well as to anti-Semitism as "a modern virus". This is a pity since rhetoric offers great potential for uncovering implicit ideologies.<sup>34</sup> With rhetorical as with other approaches to Paul, there are no neutral or value-free portraits, the

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<sup>31</sup> Danker Frederick, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Greco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field*, St. Louis: Clayton 1982.

<sup>32</sup> N. Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire", p.25.

<sup>33</sup> *The Heavenly Trumpet*, p. 424.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Vernon K Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse : rhetoric, society and ideology*, London: Routledge, 1996.

image of the authors reappear in the portraits they supply whether explicit or implicit.

One of the most disputed areas of New Testament scholarship is the issue of precisely how and when 'the partings of the ways' began to take place.<sup>35</sup> Mark Nanos has demonstrated that to make sense of Romans we need to posit a situation not only where Jewishness or rather Jewish life-style was a bone of contention, but where, as he himself maintains, Christians were still in contact with the synagogues. This means that for most, if not all of Paul's ministry, he was operating in many situations where he had to take into account the ongoing links between Jewish Christ-believers and the local synagogue.<sup>36</sup> Judith Lieu has noted the desire on the part of early church leaders for iron boundaries and impenetrable ramparts between Judaism and their Christian communities, but points out that this may in fact denote not as it appears, that a clear separation had already taken place, but on the contrary, that fuzzy boundaries were what actually existed as it were, on the ground.<sup>37</sup> This means that when Ignatius asserts that it is monstrous to confess Christ and practise Judaism that he opposes Christ-believers who in fact were actually doing just this.<sup>38</sup>

Daniel Boyarin goes further and claims that the "boundaries" between the two faiths were, even for as much as several centuries, in many places difficult to discern. The analogy he offers, instead of solid fortifications, is the boundary between major language areas.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Mark D Nanos, "The Jewish Context of the Gentile Audience Addressed in Paul's Letter to the Romans", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol 61 no 2, April 1999, pp. 283- 304.

<sup>37</sup> "Impregnable Ramparts and walls of Iron': Boundary and Identity in Early 'Judaism' and 'Christianity'", *New Testament Studies*, Vol 48, 3, pp.297-313.

<sup>38</sup> Ignatius, *Magnesian* 10:13



It is almost impossible to denote clear boundaries between local dialects where two or more language areas intersect and just as difficult to draw the boundaries around the two emergent faiths within the one Judeo-Christian reality.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Boyarin sees the ongoing movement between the two as involving a two-way traffic with the Jewish Christ-believers as the facilitators.

This new scenario can help us to understand better the fact, for so it seems, that Paul himself never 'separated' or even wanted to separate from his ancestral faith. It also allows scholars such as Peter Tomson, to claim that Paul's letters contain or reflect Jewish halakha in an incidental or fragmentary way.<sup>40</sup> Tomson identifies three different modes of the possible presence of halakha in early Christian literature: (1) halakha reflected in behaviour or speech of Jews within a narrative; (2) halakha cited in support of a hortatory argument; (3) halakha quoted in a work based on the premise that Law observance is obsolete. Tomson concludes that category (3) is not found in Paul and Galatians confirms this because Paul's plea against forced observance of the Law is itself actually based on the halakha. Here Paul supports his plea against forced judaizing of gentile believers with an explicit appeal to a halakha which pertains to proselyting procedures; "Every man who is circumcised is bound to keep the whole law and therefore by implication, those not circumcised are not bound to do so".<sup>41</sup>

Paul's use of halakha, in however limited a form, and his frequent recourse to explicit as well as implicit scriptural reference should alert us to the fact that his form of reasoning differs from post-Enlightenment patterns of rationality. Paul theologises and makes ethical decisions not in modern forms of rationality, but with what

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<sup>39</sup> *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles*, Minneapolis MI: Fortress Press, 1990, pp.259ff.

<sup>40</sup> *Paul and the Jewish Law*, p.261.

<sup>41</sup> Boyarin is completing a new book on this topic entitled, *Borderlines: 'Heresy' and the Emergence of Christianity and Judaism*.



has been described as 'scriptural reasoning'.<sup>42</sup> A similar pattern occurs in Romans 14-15 - gentiles are not obliged to keep Jewish commandments, but the strong are called upon to respect Jewish customs and the delicacies of their fellow-believers, in short, to respect Judeo-Christian identity.<sup>43</sup>

From these examples, we can begin to reconstruct our new image of Paul in his First Century context. He is Hellenized to some extent, but his Jewish pattern of life and halakhic patterns have not been rendered obsolete. He does not always see eye to eye with Peter, but neither does he oppose the mission to the circumcision, nor those Jewish believers in Christ whose conscience still tells them to keep Torah. Paul does not demand sameness in Christ but acknowledges the diversity inherent in two parallel missions within one Christ centred movement to which they both recognized the other as belonging. His opposition is not to be confined to opponents of Jewish extraction, whether believing in Christ or not, but extends to all principalities and powers for Paul certainly included the Emperor and the Imperial system in such. We are left with an image of Paul operating still on the margins of Jewish life, still maintaining links with the synagogues wherever possible; he continues to fight fiercely with the aid of a type of scriptural reasoning for the different lifestyles of Jews and gentiles in Christ, for his particular understanding of Christian identity as including diversity and recognizing difference. Above all, we see him as one who was anti-imperialist, in the sense that he refused to allow any one sub-group of Christ-believers to universalise their own identity as the norm for the entire church.

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<sup>42</sup> See the new series *Radical Traditions, Theology in a Postcritical Key*, eds. SM Hauerwas and Peter Ochs, esp. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* eds. T Frymer-Kensky, D Novak, P Ochs, DF Sandmel and MA Signer, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000, p. iv. The Foreword advocates a "return to the text" (of scriptures) and calls for new paradigms of reason, a thinking and rationality that is more responsive than originaive".

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the paper given by Philip Esler at the SBL Meeting in Denver Nov 2001, "Ancient Oleiculture and Ethnic Differentiation: The Meaning of the Olive - Tree Metaphor in Romans 11."

Dr Campbell is Reader in Biblical Studies, University of Wales Lampeter.